Castlemaine Naturalist

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Blue Caladenia – Wattle Flat

Photo Noel Young

Field trip to Wattle Flat 15-8-09

Natalie de Maccus

"Never put off till tomorrow what you can..." says the old proverb. We turned this advice on its head when we postponed our July excursion until August, due to inclement weather. And which of us would have complained about that beautiful rain? Three of us met at the "octopus" and made a trilateral decision to abandon the planned excursion to Wattle Flat. That wasn't a difficult decision given that no-one else had turned up! On August 15th (in much more suitable weather despite the rain through the intervening month) thirteen of us, led by Denis Hurley, set out from the "octopus" bound for the Woodbrook Road/Youngmans Track junction where we met up with two more participants. Proceeding in convoy we travelled along Woodbrook Road, turned into Sales Track, making our first stop along Sales Track. Here we explored both sides of the track, one side having been "ecologically thinned", the other side remaining intact.

The intact side yielded up greater diversity of vegetation including (flowering) *Drosera peltata ssp. Auriculata* (Tall Sundew), *D. Whittakeri sp aberanns* (Scented Sundew). *Wurmbea dioica* (Early Nancy), *Pterostylis nana* (Dwarf Greenhood – single plant); also *Cheilanthes austrotenuifolia* (Green Rock-fern) as well as many orchid and lily leaves promising to give a colourful display in the forthcoming weeks. A couple of unidentified fungi were also seen. I had expected to see more fungi in view of the preceding rain. Our next stop further along Sales Track was rewarded with the addition of *Diurus pardina* (Leopard Orchids), *Cyanicula caerulea* (Blue Caladenia), *Corunastylis sp. Affin rufa* (Midge Orchids) – in bud , *Hypoxis vaginata var. vaginata* (Yellow Star). There were Wax-lip Orchid leaves everywhere – one plant sporting two leaves, but a single bud (a

phenomenon not previously seen by me). This area is quite rocky and steep (who named it Wattle Flat?), but those who climbed to the summit were rewarded by a 360 degrees view. To the west Mount Tarrengower was clearly visible, as well as other "minor mountains". I expected to be able to see Mount Alexander but its eminence was blocked by nearer rises to the east (or perhaps my lack of height was the problem).

Next we moved onto Millard Track where Denis pointed out a recent echidna demolition site (of a meat ant nest). Along Millard Track we found *Acacia pycnantha* (Golden Wattle), *A. acinacea* (Gold Dust Wattle), *A. aspera* (Rough Wattle). From there we turned into Youngmans Track where we were greeted by a display of Greenhood Orchids, including *P. nutans* (Nodding Greenhoods) and *P. sp. affin parviflora* (Red-tip Greenhoods) which had just finished flowering.

At this location there were also *Ranunculus ssp.* (Buttercups). *Rhytidosporum procumbens* (White Marianth). A short walk away we were ushered with due reverence to Denis's "piece de resistance" - a colony of 15-20 *P. melagramma* (Tall Greenhoods), most of which were still flowering. Having duly admired this great find, we broke for afternoon tea.

Homeward bound we turned onto Escape Track where Denis had promised to show us a *Pterostylis robusta* (Large Striped Greenhood). Sadly one side of the track was over-run with Miners Lettuce, amongst which two *P. curta* (Blunt Greenhoods) struggled for existence. However Denis's Greenhood failed to materialise and thus became known as *"Losta robusta"*. Although there were plenty of flowers to be seen, birds were "a bit thin on the ground" and in the trees!

High country spectacular

Noel Young

At the August meeting we were treated to a "panorama spectacular" done the old-fashioned way, with two slide projectors and two screens side by side. Michael Marmach's images taken over many years of bushwalking in the high country were certainly a treat to me, as I have a similar history of wanderings both on foot and xc skis, and recognised most places shown. A bonus was his knowledge of the considerably diverse alpine vegetation, including some spectacular flowering plants.

I last roamed the Bogong High Plains two years after the devastating bushfires of January 2003, and witnessed the same dismal scenes depicted on some of Michaels' images taken around the same time. Fortunately, the ground cover seemed to be recovering rapidly, though sadly, great swathes of snow gums were destroyed, and will take decades to regrow to their former glory.

Making local contributions to scientific research as a volunteer

Chris Timewell

As a new member of the Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club (CFNC), I was keen to learn more about its past activities and fields of interest. Through reading borrowed issues of the *Castlemaine Naturalist* from the past 12 or so years, I've learnt of the club's regular involvement in the Swift Parrot/Regent Honeyeater surveys, the Birds Australia Bird Atlas project, threatened orchid surveys, the BOCA Big Birding Day and the Eltham Copper Butterfly studies to name a few. The proud history (and the enthusiasm) of the CFNC in contributing to large and small scientific projects was apparent.

Australian science has a long tradition of using volunteers during ecological field studies. It is not unusual for a project run by a single or small group of researchers to use volunteers to assist with data collection. From a logistic point of view, the research projects benefit from this either through reduced costs and/or by obtaining a greater volume of data than would otherwise be achievable. It also allows interested, and often highly experienced and knowledgeable amateur naturalists to be engaged in scientific studies, with both the researcher and the volunteer learning from each other.

I have detected a possible trend emerging whereby ecology-based projects are increasingly (and willingly) out-sourcing part, or all, of their data gathering to volunteers. These projects are also often placing trust in the volunteers to collect the data without any formal face-to-face training or accreditation. My main hypothesis for this trend is that, as a result of the "information revolution", projects can now use the internet to more quickly and (relatively) cheaply recruit, train and update their volunteer contributors compared to pre-internet times. The internet can also be used as the conduit for volunteers to then submit their collected data back to the researchers, either by email or on-line forms. Irrespective of the reason, it is a great time for the amateur naturalist, who's biggest challenge is finding enough hours in the week to assist with their chosen project (or projects).

Over a series of articles, I am aiming to describe some of the less well-known scientific projects (although not necessarily less ambitious or important) that are currently seeking contributions from volunteers, whereby the volunteer can decide when, where and how often they participate. All the projects to be described can be undertaken within the Mt Alexander shire or during travels elsewhere across the state or country. The first one (next issue) will be about the Birds in Backyards program.

Kimberley

Chris Morris

For a start it's Kimberley (not "the Kimberleys") a landscape of extraordinary size, beauty, diversity and richness; rugged harshness contrasting with creeks, gorges, rainforest and wetlands, open woodland and mangroves, saltwater sea-grass meadows and floodplains.

There are a thousand islands off the coastline and the whole mass largely escaped the wave of transformation common to the rest of colonial settlement. All the same, despite two National Parks, a significant portion of its essential conservation values are poorly protected under existing tenure. A range of rare vegetation associations and ecosystems are threatened. Poor fire management, gas processing on shore and further mining are a constant threat to the regions' natural and cultural values.

It is a breathtaking region with amazing biological diversity. No single bird species appears to be confined to the plateau itself but many take advantage of the varying habitats presented by the plateau and there are relatively large numbers in the riverine vegetation, and along the alluvial flats and open woodland.

The region as a whole is roughly the same size as Victoria and at one time carried about 800,000 head of beef cattle all grazing native vegetation. Before that sheep reached a peak of 300,000. Is it any wonder the country was eaten out!

The geology of Kimberley is complex with formations ranging from the extremely ancient to the relatively recent. The pre-Cambrian forms are well represented in metamorphosed sandstone and shales. Upper Cambrian limestones and mudstones cover a considerable area while Lower Cambrian basalts give rise to important areas of grassland and then there more recent Jurassic sediments underlying much of the southern country. Devonian limestones are prominent in the west Kimberley.

The climate is characteristically monsoon, hot and wet for part of the year and warm and dry for the rest with rain ranging from 1000mm on the coast to 250mm inland. The population is still sparse compared to other parts of the Australia of equal size and there has been a noticeable drift from the country to the town. The early cattlemen introduced the open range system of grazing which still prevails. Stock have consistently overgrazed the more attractive and productive pastures along the river frontages and

alluvial flats to the point that pastures are degraded and erosion has occurred. Maybe it will improve now that one third of the pastoral leases are under indigenous ownership.

Now turning to the Plants of the Kimberley region. In the time available we were unable to do more than confine our identification efforts and enquiries to the upper storey – i.e., the trees.

Pindan Wattle, Corkybark Wattle, Boab, Whitewood, Kurrajongs, Wild orange, Kapok, E. bella (the ghost gum), Bloodwoods, E. Coolabah, E. miniata (Woollybutt), Beefwood, Cooliman Tree, Fan Palm, Pandanus Palm, Melaleuca paperbark Cadjeputs, Quinine Tree.

Spinifex Triodia takes over on hillside slopes replacing Sorghum Sp. two metres or more in height, uncomfortable and thus torched at every opportunity.

Rather than recording every bird it became easier to concentrate on birds not seen in S.E. Australia and listed by Pizzey as "specials" for the Kimberley region – such as: Burdekin Duck, Whistling Ducks, Osprey, Fork-tailed Kite, Peregrine Falcon, Egrets, Bush-stone Curlew, Partridge Pigeon, Sandstone Shrike-thrush, Brolgas, Jabiru, Sea Eagle, Red-tailed Cockatoo, Red-winged Parrots, Budgerigars, Northern Rosella, Blue-winged Kookaburra, White-bellied Cuckoo, Mangrove Robin, Mangrove Golden Whistler, White-throated Warbler, Jacana, Black-tailed Treecreeper, White-gaped Honeyeater, Yellow-tinted Honeyeater, White-throated Honeyeater, Double-barred Finch, Long-tailed Finch, Masked Finch, Great Bower Bird, Torresian Crow, Peaceful Dove.

Not many out of 220 birds listed for the Plateau.

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Timing is everything

Tony Morton

For many years it had been noticed by those obsessed with such things, that a few insects in the Natural History Museum of Victoria were slightly different from the other Rayed Blues (*Candalides heathi*) in the collections. The underside was grey rather than silvery. The 'rays' (the veins on the upper side of both wings) were distinctly golden. The labels pointed out a locality a hundred kilometres or so west of Natimuk near a lake. The larval food plant might be a creeping species of *Myoporum,* the labels said. The date given on them was December 1997.
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Two keen and not-so-young lepidopterists were determined to settle the matter. This could be a new species! It was mid-October. Perhaps they'd be too early. But it had been a hot spring. This sometimes causes early emergence. The collectors leapt into their 4WD and zoomed off. Early the next day they arrived at the (now dry) lake west of Natimuk. They spent seven hours patrolling the area. They saw nothing. There were traces of dried out *Myoporum*, but no insects at all, except bushflies.

Tired and hungry, they retraced their steps. A fast food outlet in Horsham beckoned them. Famished and dribbling, they pulled up in the parking area. They got out, ready to place a large order – and noticed that hedges and ground cover were 'alive' with small blue butterflies! A quick inspection showed that they were indeed the 'Wimmera form' of *Candalides heathi*, now called *Candalides noelkeri*, after the first collector of the insect. The esteemed landscaper of this recent development behind Horsham's now celebrated Red Rooster had planted the parking lot with different species of *Myoporum*! What is more, the blessed and far-sighted Horsham City Fathers had planted new housing developments and pedestrian ways near the river with MORE *Myoporum*, as well as other indigenous plants. Along these tracks were also 'hundreds' of this butterfly, one was told by this highly chuffed pair.

Consequently, and excitedly, fingers well crossed, a friend and I made our way to Horsham on the 10th November. We found the areas we had been told about easily enough that very morning, and the various *Myoporum* species were lushly flourishing. BUT, there were now no butterflies to be seen. We were too late!

Taking this punch on the chin philosophically, the next day we drove up to Mildura, where we had very recently been told about the 'common' occurrence of another Blue, one of the few 'Holy Grails' for Victorian collectors, known as *Ogyris subterrestris* or the Mildura Ogyris, or the Arid Bronze Azure. The larvae of this butterfly live underground (as the name suggests!), in ants' nests, but are too idle to leave them in order to eat mistletoe, as most of the other species of the genus do, but prefer to feast on the ant larvae and pupae (the ants put up with this very happily, for various fascinating reasons that I won't go into here). We discovered the area easily enough. It was along a new fence-line, where the old wooden posts had been replaced by metal pickets. The old posts had been left on the ground, gently rotting, and under all of them were nests of Sugar Ants *(Camponotus sp.).* The nests were probably teeming with the butterfly's eggs, and maybe very small larvae, but these one shouldn't collect; they're far too difficult to deal with. We patrolled the fence-line and adjacent tracks for several hours, but saw **nothing**. Plenty of flies, of course. We were too late!!

Join the search for a rare Orchid in October

We are planning two trips to assist DSE in scouting likely locations for the rare **Sutton Grange Greenhood Orchid**

The first will be on Sunday 4th October at 10.00 a.m.
Meet at the Beehive Mine car park in Maldon

The follow up trip will utilise our field trip on 10th October
Meet at the usual place and time for field trips

Observations

- A Mistletoe Bird in Cootamundra Wattle, eating berries – Rosemary Turner
- A pair of Little Eagles and a Kite, Tawny Frogmouths near the Prison farm, and a very golden Wedge tailed Eagle – Natasha Harris
- A brown Goshawk seen on more than one occasion circling over the "Octopus" in Duke st. - Chris Timewell
- Tall? Greenhoods on Poverty Gully channel – Penny Garnet
- Wax-lips, Dwarf Greenhoods, basal leaves of **Slaty Helmet Orchid** – Hans van Gemert
- Denis Hurley reports that Eastern Rosellas have returned to the same stump for their fourth nesting year, the Magpies have babies, and W.W. Choughs are nesting. Also heard a Horsefield's Bronze Cuckoo.
- August 19; Two or three Fan-tailed Cuckoos calling along Forest Ck near Chewton - Noel Young
- Rita Mills has a pair of White faced Herons in the paddock for a week or so and is hoping for a nest
- A Grey Shrike-thrush has returned to nest in the same spot where it raised 3 chicks last year – about a metre from the bedroom door – Nigel Harland
- Chris Morris reports his house and garden is still under attack from Cockatoos and Choughs!
- Also reported at the August meeting – Powerful Owls nesting in Maldon, as well as several Yellow tufted Honeyeater nests.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the club

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Programme
September 2009

Fri Sept 11th meeting: BETH GOTT: Wild Food
Sat Sept 12th field trip: *with Beth Gott – 11 am start.
***PLEASE NOTE EARLY START TIME !**

Wednesday Wildflower Walks: (4pm for ~ 1 hour)
#1 September 16th – old fire tower tk, Fryers Ridge
#2 September 23rd – Muckleford railway line
#3 September 30th – The Monk
#4 October 7th – Kalimna Park

Fri Oct 9th meeting: ERN PERKINS: A celebration of Eucalypts
Sat Oct 10th field trip: Rare Orchid search
Fri Nov 13th meeting: DR MARY COLE: Mycorrhizae and Environmental Health

VISITORS ARE WELCOME AT CLUB ACTIVITIES

General meetings - (second Friday of each month, except January) are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) Hall (enter from Lyttleton St.) at 8.00 pm.
Field Trips - (Saturday following the general meeting) leave from the car park opposite Castle Motel, Duke Street at 1.30pm sharp unless stated otherwise. BYO morning and/or afternoon tea. Outdoor excursions are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions. There are NO excursions on total fire ban days.
Business meetings - fourth Thursday of each month, except December, at Natalies; 65 Johnstone Street, at 7.30 pm. All members are invited to attend.

Subscriptions for 2009
Ordinary membership: Single $27, Family $35
Pensioner or student: Single $24, Family $29
Subscription includes postage of the monthly newsletter, Castlemaine Naturalist

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